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# Knut Hamsun and the Nazis

BY EINAR HAUGEN

WHEN Norway was invaded by the Germans, one of her greatest men of letters amazed the world by appealing to his countrymen to welcome the invaders. This was Knut Hamsun, famous author of *Growth of the Soil*, and these were the words he used:

“When the English in their barbarism forced their way into the Jossingfjord and violated our independence, you did nothing. When they laid mines along our coast in order to bring the war to Norwegian soil, you again did nothing. But when the German troops occupied Norway and prevented the war from coming to our country, then you did do something. Then you banded together with your runaway king and his private government, and mobilized. It is utterly senseless to seize your guns and take up a battle with the Germans. England is not able to help you. She will send you only some small bands of men who are already roaming through the valleys and begging for food. Norwegians: throw away your guns and go back home. The Germans are fighting for us all and are breaking the tyranny that England wields over us and other neutrals.”

This frankly pro-German statement won Hamsun much ill-will among his countrymen and caused bitter comment in those sections of Norway that were still free. Among Norwegian organs in the United States it has led to a kind of Hamsun-boycott, so that his name is now regularly omitted when famous Norwegians are enumerated. Charges of German compulsion, sinister influences, or even downright treason have been made, and some have bracketed him with Quisling as an example of the supposed “Fifth Column” in Norway.

There can be no doubt that Hamsun actually wrote this statement; its dramatic repetitions, and its skillfully chosen words of abuse are utterly Hamsunesque. But its contents are also typical, and in no way surprising to those who have followed his career and writings. Hamsun was not bought or coerced into writing these words. He was openly pro-Nazi before the invasion, and no regret for the loss of his

nation's independence could change his conviction that the Germans were preferable to the English, or even to the Norwegian labor regime.

This may come as a painful surprise to some of his admirers in the United States, whose nostalgic dream of the soil was once nourished by his magnificent paean to the simple life. In the inevitable weariness with civilization that grew out of the First World War, many welcomed a retreat from the perplexities of modern life into Hamsun's dream-world. Few contemplated in any serious way an actual return to nature, and simple realities of economics prevented most people from following the author's example and becoming landed gentlemen. Certainly most of Hamsun's admirers would bitterly have resented any suggestion that they live in so narrow a world as the one pictured in *Growth of the Soil*. The oldest could not imagine that a movement would arise which would take this book seriously, and try to carry out in practice some of its violently anti-cultural implications.

Yet this was just what happened in Germany after the war. A generation grew up who made of *Growth of the Soil* a kind of Bible, in the words of a German critic, Ulrich Knigge, "a half poetic, half religious mystery which is the unattainable model of all romantic souls between the ages of ten and forty. . . ." "To the Germans," says this critic, writing in 1934, "Scandinavia is a distant Utopia, a garden of Eden, where racially pure maids and swains live a soul life which is just as heroic as it is vegetative, a place where life is at once primitively sensual and full of mystic, elevated symbols." This book became one of the taproots of the Nazi movement, a mystic guidebook to a new social order, in which men and women lived their lives in communion with nature, knowing nothing beyond the wisdom they needed to till the soil and procreate. To anyone who should take it in full seriousness, the book was a call to arms against the emancipation of women, against education and book-learning, against mechanical progress, social ambition, the labor movement, and urban life in general. But to most readers these underlying antagonisms were veiled by the positive back-to-nature message of the book and the fantastic artistry with which it was presented.

Hamsun's antagonisms are less veiled in many of his other books, and especially in his articles. A brilliant selection of these was made in 1939 by Professor Francis Bull, and published to honor Hamsun's eightieth birthday. In this volume of essays it is striking to see how consistent a line Hamsun has followed, how the line that led from

*Growth of the Soil* in 1920 to Nazism in 1940 also leads back to his debut in 1889, a half century ago.

In that year he wrote an article on August Strindberg, one of a series of lectures in which he smashed away at the great classics of Norway, Ibsen and Bjørnsøn, scorning them because they tried to be realistic and useful,—they were engaged in “reforming society.” But Strindberg he admired without reserve, and it is extremely significant to see what he chose to cite from Strindberg’s profuse opinions. His own sympathies are tacitly revealed. Strindberg, he says, is “a reactionary radical,” for he wants to “get out of our present mess by turning back . . . By turning back, we get to nature, from which culture has taken us away.” “That man has a hatred of culture in his very veins.” “There is nothing whatever can save man except gross, veritable reaction.” Strindberg wants to recapture “the happy, un-grieved joy” of children and the savages, and he wants back “our half-lost physical powers.” He hates the “emancipated” woman, for “woman as a creature inferior to man should also have the consciousness of being inferior.” Strindberg’s works all vary the theme of “nature versus culture.”

In the same year, 1889, Hamsun stirred up controversy by a book on the United States, from which he had just returned. This slashing attack was entitled “From the Cultural Life of Modern America,” and its thesis was that in a country of undistinguished mediocrity there was no room for a spiritual élite. Amid the bustle of American mechanized life he saw no evidence or even hope of literary or artistic distinction. There was no special originality in these charges, but Hamsun gave them a significant twist by repeatedly associating them with political democracy.

“Americans do not distinguish between Freedom and Democracy; in order to maintain a compact Democracy, they are willing to sacrifice Freedom.” “American Freedom is not a Freedom for the human being, for the person, but a Freedom en masse and for all.” “The American soul is without aristocracy; the Americans are democratized to the core, educated to conformity, brought up to mediocrity, accustomed to express themselves without nobility. . .” “The Civil War was a war against aristocracy, carried on with all the raging hate of democratic people for the plantation nobility of the South.” “It is unreasonable to expect an élite in a country which as a nation is a mere experiment, and whose population of born inferiors has been brought

up in patriotic hate of all that is not native." "The highest ambition of Americans is to be well-descended Yankees, whose goal is the niveau: a political democracy."

As we might expect, the American woman comes in for her share of opprobrium. American women are outstanding examples of cultural parasites: "American women are in the position of having the following life tasks: to have nerves, paint works of art, enjoy negro poetry, promenade and attend congresses. But they cannot find the time to bring forth children." He even dispenses a touch of racial antagonism: "Inhumanity stole the negroes away from Africa, where they belong, and Democracy made them civilized citizens contrary to the order of nature. . . . Negroes are and remain negroes, an attempt at human beings from the tropics, creatures with intestines in their head—rudimentary organs on the body of white society."

Hamsun's attack on America was not simply a distaste for our country as such, but rather an evidence of his aversion to capitalistic-industrial civilization in general. He has since admitted that his youthful judgments of America were hasty, but the point of view from which they were written has not changed. He received his cast of mind in the late eighties, an era of hero-worship and culture-weariness, when Nietzsche was proclaiming the death of democracy. After an era of optimistic progress, and battles for reform and the common man, the intellectuals suddenly discovered that the common man was petty, pious, and parsimonious, and not at all grateful for the help he had gotten from the radical intelligentsia. So literature in Norway, as elsewhere in Europe, turned to nature, lyricism, introspection—and the superman.

As the symptoms of capitalism began to show up in his own country, he rose to give battle against what he considered its growing "Americanization." He resented the rise of industry in Norway, as we see from his devastating analyses of its consequences in such novels as *Segelfoss Town* (1915) and *August* (1930). He felt no sympathy with the labor movement and its triumphs, for he regarded its claims as further evidence of the sickness of the new social order. In a letter of 1916 he wrote to a labor editor: "More class struggle, you say! More agriculture in Norway, you should say, more production, you should say." In an article of 1918 he pleaded with farmers to take their daughters home from the city: "She is superfluous in town—she is needed in the country; she earns a pitiful 50 or 100 kroner in town and

grows pale and empty—lift her back to the farm and the healthy life!”

He chided the Norwegians for their movement towards a money economy; they were turning into a nation of hotelkeepers for the tourist trade. “We have given up our satisfaction, our good calm, our small and quiet habits; we have lost our capacity for work. This hotel marriage with foreigners is becoming a charming means of self-weakening. We are becoming a people of waiters, in the position of public beggars, our hats off, our hands thrust forward to receive the copper coin!” He hammered away at every evidence of the changing times, the extravagance which went with flush and easy money: “We have forgotten the wisdom of being content. We have lost the capacity of doing without.” All of these ideas he wove more or less obtrusively into his *Growth of the Soil*; Geissler, his mouth-piece, says: “My son, ay, he’s the modern type, a man of our time; he believes honestly enough all the age has taught him, all the Jew and the Yankee have taught him. . .”

With such opinions it is clear that when the First World War gave him the choice between England and Germany, Hamsun’s predilections would turn toward Germany. In 1910 he had written: “The modern Anglo-Saxon does not travel through the air in order to enjoy himself, to rest in quiet, to rock. He does it to get places in a hurry, to make records, to have the uproar in his heart. The Anglo-Saxon has introduced the false modern view of existence. The Anglo-Saxon has derailed life.” In 1916 he summed up the war as follows: “This is what war means: England and France have little or no increase in population, but huge colonies for which they have no use. Germany is bursting with people and does not have enough colonies. Germany sniffs around in all the remote corners of the world to find room for her surplus population. Every time England is on the spot with her resistance. Germany waits for fifteen years, her population is constantly growing, and then it strikes. That is war. And then begin the moving words about Germany’s barbarism.”

An amusing evidence of the persistence of Hamsun’s ideas is found in the latest of his books to be published in English, *Look Back on Happiness*. The American critics smelled Nazism at once, and Clifton Fadiman of the *New Yorker* wrote that Hamsun “in this book would appear to range himself emotionally with the purveyors of the streamlined feudalism now so popular in Germany.” “Hamsun looks like

another Lost Leader. Just for a handful of Hitler he left us. . .” But Fadiman was not aware that this book was originally written and published in—1912! Its title was *Den Sidste Glæde*, and it closed with an apostrophe to “the modern spirit in Norway,” which Hamsun called “a plague” that he had tried to stop, but without success.

In the eighties he was regarded as a dangerous radical, because he wore mourning for the Haymarket assassins, Chicago anarchists executed through popular hysteria. But his radicalism then and later was not the radicalism of a reformist, but that of a reactionary revolutionist. It was a thoroughgoing aversion to all the expressions of modern capitalism, which combined with the superman’s distaste for democracy, and the peasant’s antagonism to the urban proletariat to point the way toward modern Nazi doctrine, from Blut und Boden, and the suppression of woman, to the movement for the Kraft durch Freude.

Hamsun’s reactionary doctrines won him no following among his Norwegian contemporaries. His admiration for the Norwegian Nazi leader, Vidkun Quisling, was not shared by his countrymen. It is said that within the electoral district where Hamsun cast his vote, he was the only one for the Quisling ticket. He disowned his own son, who returned from a visit to Germany a confirmed opponent of Nazism. It is no wonder that in his latest years the Norwegians were fond of turning against Hamsun certain words he wrote in an essay of 1907: “At his fiftieth year a man passes the noonday line of his life; from now on he enters a stage of retrogression, where he stays until his death. . . . A man becomes eighty years. His picture is in the papers, because he is eighty years. When he is a couple and four score, he dies. His picture is in the papers, because he dies. A couple of weeks later he is buried and the papers must contain a description of this ceremony. Finished, finished at last. But the whole man has been dead for twenty, thirty years. They just haven’t buried him before.”

All the ideas that Hamsun has today were present in his work, at least in embryo form, a half century ago. But then they loomed upon the scene as ideals exalting the nobility of nature and the human spirit; to-day they have shrunk to serve as the handmaids of a totalitarian state.—*University of Wisconsin*.